

Telegraphist William McCombie Gilbert V-13821



Bill Gilbert. Photo Credit: Western Canada High School Yearbook 1939

- **Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve**
- **Born: Calgary AB, 3 May 1920**
- **Enlisted: HMCS *Tecumseh*, 8 May 1941**
- **Civilian Occupation: Steel Worker, Dominion Bridge**
- **Death: Lost at sea when HMCS *Louisburg* sank on 6 February 1943**
- **Commemorated: Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; Western Canada High School WW2 Memorial Plaque; The Field of Crosses in Calgary; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque in Calgary; and Alberta Naval Museum Plaque in Calgary**

William McCombie Gilbert's friends and family knew him as Bill Gilbert. He worked as a Steel Worker for the Dominion Bridge Company in Calgary, Alberta, when he made the decision to enlist in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR).

Bill was the only son and oldest child of Scottish immigrants William McCombie and Jane Gilbert. He was born on 3 May 1920 and his sister Grace Isobelle was born on 5 March 1922.

Bill's mother Jane Turnbull came from Roxburg County, in Scotland, where she was born on 17 March 1891. In 1911 she boarded a ship in Glasgow with her two sisters, Margaret and Mary, and they immigrated to Canada. They landed at the Port of Quebec City on 10 July 1911, and then moved west to Alberta, eventually settling in Calgary.

Bill's father William McCombie Gilbert was born on 1 August 1887 in Aberdeen, Scotland. He immigrated to Canada in 1907 and travelled west to Alberta in search of relatives that had moved there earlier. On 28 July 1909, he made an application for a homestead farm but ended up living in Calgary instead. He worked as a labourer until the Calgary Police Force accepted him on 1 May 1911. By the outbreak of World War One, William had four years of service with the Police Force, and he had met Jane Turnbull. William asked for and was given a leave of absence from the Police Force so that he could serve in the Canadian Army. He enlisted on 3 November 1915. On 13 December 1915, William and Jane married at Knox United Church in downtown Calgary. Jane lived at 2207 21 Street SW while William attended basic training. Because of his police experience he trained quickly and the Army promoted him to the rank of Corporal faster than other soldiers would normally advance. The Army drafted William overseas in June 1916 and sent him directly to the front lines, where he was field promoted to Sergeant on 21 June 1916. He was wounded on 24 July 1917, but recovered quickly and returned to the front lines.

For his service at Passchendaele, the Canadian Army awarded William the Military Medal on 23 February 1918, and on 28 April 1918 the Army field promoted him to Lieutenant. From 23 to 26 August 1918 William led a battle patrol through heavy fighting around Neuville Vitasse (near Ypres). His patrol located an enemy post, which he rushed and disabled, capturing an Officer and Gun Crew in the process. Unfortunately, during this action enemy shell fire seriously wounded him. The Army awarded him the Military Cross, but the wound to the lower leg was severe enough that he was given a medical discharge and sent home to Canada on 31 March 1919. He received excellent medical care at the Ogden Military Hospital and Colonel Belcher Hospital in Calgary.

1920 was a good year for the Gilbert family. William had recovered from his leg injury well enough to rejoin the Calgary Police Force, and on 3 May 1920, William McCombie Gilbert Jr. was born. The family purchased and moved into a house on the south edge of Calgary, at 1522 34 Avenue S.W. On 5 March 1922 the second child, Grace Isobelle, joined the family. Bill and Grace's mother also changed her name to Jean Gilbert around this time. The family became active members of the Southminster United Church located at 3818 14A Street S.W.

In 1926 Bill Gilbert began attending school. The family's address was a few blocks from King Edward Public School, located at 1720 30 Avenue S.W. This was one of Calgary's historic sandstone schools, several of which still remain today. Bill went here for grades one through nine and then attended high school at Western Canada High School located at 641 17 Avenue S.W. Western Canada High School was considerably farther away from the Gilbert residence, but in the 1930's the #7 South Calgary Streetcar was still in service and it passed near their house on 34 Avenue and went north on 14 Street right into the downtown area.

In 1939 Bill's high school yearbook stated that he was an avid hockey and soccer fan and that he also enjoyed playing football. Bill also mentioned that he had an interest in chemistry and planned to work at the British American Oil Refinery in the Inglewood area in Calgary after graduating. However, after graduating Bill found employment as a Steelworker with the Dominion Bridge Company in Calgary. He was still working at this job when he decided to enlist in the RCNVR at the Calgary naval reserve base (later named HMCS *Tecumseh*) on 8 May 1941.



Photograph of Telegraphist William McCombie Gilbert from Ancestry.ca family documents
The kitten shown and an Irish terrier named Looie were the ship's Mascots and were also lost at sea.

It was a complete surprise to Bill's family that he enlisted in the naval reserve, but he told them that his friends who had enlisted inspired him. The identities of those friends remain unknown, but it is possible that one of them was Thomas Maxton Ninian (Bill had attended high school with Maxton and he enlisted four days after him). They both requested to be trained as telegraphists and the Navy dispatched them to Halifax at the same time. Both men would serve on HMCS *Louisburg* together.

Bill was put on "division strength" in Calgary until 19 June 1941, when he was given a uniform and received basic training. His attestation

documents state that he was 6' & 1/2" tall, weighed 150 pounds, and had brown hair and blue eyes. He identified as Presbyterian, and he spoke only English. Bill stated that he only wished to

serve for the “duration of the hostilities” and was not sure what he planned to do after his service. Bill remained interested in the telegraphist trade, and as a high school graduate, it was a good choice.

On 16 June 1941, the Navy posted Bill to HMCS *Stadacona*, the training base in Halifax Nova Scotia. He began a rigorous training schedule in both seamanship and the Telegraphist trade. Being a telegraphist was demanding, and the Navy trained recruits in Morse code and basic radio equipment. They also learned proper formatting for messages and how to code and decode messages. The Canadian Navy initially had difficulty training recruits in this trade at the beginning of the war due to a general lack of reading and writing skills, prompting a requirement for recruits to have finished two years of high school. After six weeks of training the Navy tested recruits, and if they did not pass then they were reassigned to a new trade. Bill Gilbert was rated as an Ordinary Telegraphist on 2 August 1941, and he continued training at *Stadacona* until 17 January 1942.

The Navy posted Bill Gilbert to HMCS *Louisburg* on 17 January 1942. *Louisburg* was a Flower Class Corvette built in the Quebec City shipyards and was commissioned on 16 October 1941. Initially, *Louisburg* was in the Sydney Force, escorting convoys from Nova Scotia to St. John's, Newfoundland, where more experienced RCN escorts would take over and escort the convoy to the mid-Atlantic where the Royal Navy would take over and escort the convoy to Londonderry, Ireland. Bill probably joined *Louisburg* in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on its last Sydney Force escort. On 1 February 1942 *Louisburg* left St. Johns on its first Newfy-Derry convoy, Slow Convoy 67 (SC67). On 15 February 1942 German U-boats attacked SC67, sinking HMCS *Spikenard* while *Louisburg* maneuvered and fought to protect the convoy. The. After returning from SC67 *Louisburg* went to Halifax for an extensive refit until mid-June of 1942. The Navy promoted Bill Gilbert to Telegraphist on 18 February 1942. At the end of June 1942, *Louisburg* returned to duty on Newfoundland to Londonderry escorts. These were now renamed the Mid Ocean Force and the convoys escorted merchant shipping all the way to Londonderry.

In September of 1942, the Navy assigned several Canadian ships including *Louisburg* to the UK-Gibraltar Escort route. These escorts would leave the United Kingdom and proceed to Gibraltar, and from Gibraltar, they would go to Bone, Algeria. The danger in the Atlantic was from submarines; they also had to deal with enemy aircraft in the Mediterranean; consequently, *Louisburg* spent a month in Humber being refitted with anti-aircraft armaments. *Louisburg* suffered further delays when HMS *Bideford* accidentally rammed it on 9 December 1942 while at anchor in Londonderry. The collision caused extensive damage and *Louisburg* needed five weeks of repairs in Belfast, Ireland. Finally, in late January 1943 *Louisburg* began escorting convoys from Gibraltar to Bone. *Louisburg* was one of eight Canadian Corvettes and two British Destroyers assigned to Convoy KMS8 travelling from Gibraltar to Algeria. On 6 February 1943, the force found itself six miles off the Algerian coast near Oran when two formations of axis bombers attacked HMS *Laforey* and *Louisburg*. Three dive bombers attacked *Louisburg* from east of the mountains on shore. They came in very low and although *Louisburg's*



anti-aircraft guns were manned, they could not train on the enemy aircraft because of the sun, which was directly behind the bombers. One plane came in very low and fired a torpedo, which made a direct hit near *Louisburg's* engine room, causing it to sink in less than five minutes. Most of the crew that worked in the engine room were killed instantly, and several others perished when the ship's depth charges exploded as the ship sank. There were 45 survivors and 42 men lost at sea. Five of the deceased were British sailors being transported to Oran, the other 37 were Canadians including Calgary sailors William McCombie Gilbert and Maxton Ninian.

For his service, the Navy awarded Telegraphist William McCombie Gilbert: The Canadian Volunteer Service Medal with Clasp, the 1939-45 Star, the Africa Star, the Atlantic Star and the War Medal. His mother Jean Gilbert was awarded the Memorial Cross and his father the Memorial Bar on 20 March 1943.

Telegraphist William McCombie Gilbert is remembered on the following memorials: the Halifax Memorial, Panel 10; the Western Canada High School WW2 Memorial Plaque; the Field of Crosses in Calgary; HMCS *Tecumseh* Memorial Plaque in Calgary; Alberta Naval Museum Plaque in Calgary; and, the Second World War Book of Remembrance, page 163 at the Centre Block House of Parliament, Ottawa.

Bill's mother Jean closed the door to his bedroom when he was sent overseas, she told him that it would remain closed, and the room would be left as it was until he returned after the war. Years later Bill's nephew Blair Fraser entered the room and said it was like stepping back in time.

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Sources:

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission Database – Profile for William McCombie Gilbert
- Library and Archives Canada>military file for William McCombie Gilbert (junior)
- Library and Archives Canada>military file for William McCombie Gilbert (senior)
- Calgary Herald Article: February 16 1943 page 1
- Calgary Herald Article: September 4 1918 page 5
- Calgary Herald Article: September 4 1976: obituary for William McCombie Gilbert (senior)
- Corvettes Canada (Convoy Veterans of WW II tell their stories) by Mac Johnson
- E-mail conversations with Blair Fraser (Bill Gilbert's nephew)